

## YOUR TURN

# The libraries: State money well spent

FRANCES FARRELL-BERGERON

As we continue to hear distressing news about the state's financial woes, we tend to assume that there must be a lot of wasteful spending going on somewhere, and if we only find and cut it we can save the "good" programs — the ones that are delivering valuable services — in contrast to departments whose purpose, murky and vaguely defined, seems really to be to give somebody's uncle a cushy state job at taxpayers' expense.

When we get past that point and think more clearly, we know that, if the crisis is as acute as predicted, even identifying all the wasteful spending might not be enough, and even the "good" programs might have to suffer cuts until we get our financial house in order.

Of course, we may disagree about which are the "good" programs and which are the ripoffs.

As a taxpayer, I'd like to get rid of wasteful spending. As a librarian, I have good news for Rhode Islanders: state funding for public libraries is not part of it.

Yes, it is self-interest for me to argue this, but I have empirical evidence to present from my own experience.

Here is how the West Warwick Public Library spends its state grant-in-aid:

### Sunday hours

Sunday is family day at the library. Kids do their homework or term papers, Mom and Dad browse or look for materials for work or home projects, and then the whole family chooses a video. Our library users had requested Sunday hours for years, but it was only with state funding that we could afford to provide this service.

### Family Literacy

West Warwick is one of five libraries in the state participating in the Family Literacy Pro-

ject modeled by the Providence Public Library. The project provides learner-centered literacy classes for families facing social, economic, and educational barriers because of limited English language skills. It is unique among literacy services because its focus is on the family. While adults attend small group reading or writing sessions, their children are in a different part of the library at a craft or other program. In this way, adults can get the language training they need and know that their kids are safe. Although most of the funding for this much-needed service comes from federal or foundation grants, we have dedicated a portion of our state grant to ensuring that Family Literacy is a full-service department.

### Elderly Outreach

Elderly Outreach is our way of bringing the library to those who cannot come to us. This is the most rapidly growing age group as Baby Boomers approach retirement. This means that all social service agencies, including libraries, should be planning now for ways to meet the needs of an aging population. A large number of the elderly poor live in subsidized housing in West Warwick and it is our hope that our visits with books and audio-visual materials help them feel less isolated and more a part of the community. One hundred percent of this service is funded by our state grant.

### CLAN and Electronic Databases

CLAN (Cooperating Libraries Automated Network) is a remarkable network of public libraries that have shared their holdings to create one statewide public library,

open and accessible to all Rhode Islanders. People can search the CLAN database and order materials from any library in the network and have them delivered to their home library in a matter of days. Through CLAN, libraries also provide Internet access — and this is especially crucial for people who cannot afford computers. Those who do own computers can access their local libraries remotely from home. In recent years we have used the purchasing power of this block of libraries to negotiate better prices for online databases.

Lots of people think that all of their research needs can now be filled by the Internet. But while the Internet is a wonderful innovation and has lots of good data, it is also filled with inaccurate, out-of-date and — let's face it — just plain wacky information. That's why I want to stress that access to databases offered by legitimate and recognized publishers is very different from searching randomly on the Web and getting information that may or may not be accurate or timely.

As is true of all other public libraries in the state, it is only through our membership in CLAN and all the access it provides that we can offer a full-service library to the people of West Warwick. And without state funding, which pays for almost 70 percent of our membership fees, we would not be able to participate in CLAN.

There are examples like this in public libraries across the state, because librarians are experts at taking money and turning it into direct service. Rhode Islanders who use libraries — just under 500,000

people, more than half of the state's population, have CLAN library cards — count on the improvement and enhancement of services that state funding guarantees.

This brings us to the most important role the state grant-in-aid plays for libraries: that of the Great Equalizer. It is state funding alone that ensures all Rhode Islanders, regardless of where they live, have equal access to the same basic level of library service. Without it, many small libraries in rural areas and large libraries in our urban centers would not be able to afford membership in CLAN or any of the other commitments that allow them to participate in statewide sharing, and that would mean users of those libraries would suffer the loss of access to the full range of information and knowledge.

It is comforting to some to think of the public library as a cultural amenity, a picture-perfect New England building where little old ladies go to check out the latest fiction. In fact, the public library is the repository of the world's knowledge and the portal to the Information Age, and a basic necessity as important to our civic life as schools and the police and fire departments. It is the one institution in our democracy that opens its doors to all, regardless of age, race, gender, economic status or any other qualifier you can name, and invites them to take advantage of resources that can make them productive citizens and help them realize their dreams.

There may be waste somewhere in the state budget, but it isn't here. State funding for public libraries works.

*Frances Farrell-Bergeron is the director of the West Warwick Public Library.*